

Why Does Everything Online Feel So Extreme?

A modern question about coherence and contact

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Abstract

Online systems select emotionally activating signals because intensity produces measurable response. The selected material then becomes a representation of what people supposedly care about, which shapes later production, interpretation, and behavior. This concept note explains how engagement optimization turns exceptional intensity into apparent prevalence and then uses that appearance to reorganize the environment.

The Question

Why Does Everything Online Feel So Extreme?

The Felt Experience

Headlines lean toward crisis. Posts are framed through outrage, urgency, revelation, or conflict. Comment sections pull ambiguous events toward the most emotionally charged interpretation, and ordinary disagreement can start to look like evidence of a much larger social rupture. The result is an online environment that often feels more extreme than daily physical life. The feed still presents itself as a window onto what is happening, but what reaches the user has already been sorted according to what is most likely to produce a response. What feels like prevalence may partly be selection.

The Coherent Surface

The coherent surface is apparent prevalence. When similar high-intensity signals appear again and again, they create a convincing picture of what everyone is discussing, fearing, or becoming. Repetition matters because it can make selected material feel independently confirmed. What appears to be many separate signals may actually reflect the same underlying selection pressure.

What the Coherence Conceals

The feed does not show its own transformation history. It does not reveal everything that was ignored, which signals were amplified, why certain interpretations ranked higher, or how users

changed their behavior in response to what the system rewarded. By the time the user sees the result, the environment has already been filtered and shaped. The feed can appear to describe the world after participating in the process that made the world look that way.

How the Drift Develops

Events contain different levels of urgency, conflict, novelty, and emotional intensity. Platforms cannot measure significance directly, so they rely on signals such as clicks, comments, watch time, and sharing. Material that reliably produces those signals receives more visibility. Repeated exposure then makes the selected intensity appear more representative of the larger environment than it may actually be.

Creators, institutions, and users adapt to what receives attention. They produce more material in the forms the system has already rewarded. The resulting environment becomes more intense, and that intensified environment is measured again as evidence of what people supposedly wanted in the first place. The system therefore moves from selecting intensity to helping produce it, then treats the result as confirmation of the original selection.

Connection to Reality Drift

This is a recursive Reality Drift loop. Reality is selectively captured, translated into engagement metrics, optimized, and returned as a representation of what matters. Behavior adapts to that representation, and the altered environment is then measured again. The system still works. Engagement remains measurable. The feed remains coherent. What becomes harder to recover is the difference between what was originally present and what became more prevalent because the system repeatedly selected for it.

Related Concepts

Optimization Trap appears when engagement becomes the practical objective and begins displacing harder-to-measure qualities such as significance, proportion, and context.

Representation Stack describes how events move through capture, metrics, operational representations, optimization, and narrative before reaching the user.

Recursive Compression occurs when selected interpretations become reusable material for later posts, summaries, models, and reactions.

Synthetic Realness appears when the optimized feed feels like a clearer and more convincing account of society than ordinary experience.

Filter Fatigue develops when users must continually judge the importance and prevalence of high-intensity signals whose origins and proportions are difficult to reconstruct.

Series Context

The series examines familiar experiences of modern life that emerge when representations become smoother, faster, and more internally coherent while losing corrective contact with lived reality. Across the series, the central question is what that coherence still remains answerable to. A representation can become more legible and persuasive while losing the context and proportion that once corrected it.

In this case, the problem is not simply that the internet contains extreme material. It is that systems can repeatedly select, amplify, and reproduce intensity until the resulting environment begins to look like independent evidence that the intensity was there all along.

Coherence is not contact.